

## 2 Peter 2:1-22. A World of False Teachers

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**2 Peter 2:1. *But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.***

Up to this point in Peter's second epistle he has focused primarily on (1) presenting God's plan for the salvation of mankind, (2) encouragement for living a godly life and (3) standing firm on the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. By the time we encounter the second chapter we begin to get an idea of where Peter is leading with this discussion as he refers to those who had arisen to positions of influence in the church who openly promote ungodly living and question the authority of the Apostles and the truth of scripture.<sup>1</sup> "Only Christ's withering woes on hypocritical leaders in Matthew 23 and the parallel picture in the Epistle of Jude convey the same severe denunciation of false teachers contained in this chapter."<sup>2</sup>

We live in a world that promotes many different messages and ideologies that are certainly as varied and as influential in today's cultures as they were in the ancient near-east. The ascetism of today's pagan cultures, typical of eastern religions, is relatively unchanged from those that Peter was familiar with. The humanism and relativism of today's hyper-secular western cultures parallels the Greek Hellenism and epicurean philosophies of the first century. We even receive a variety of messages from a church that has divided itself into well-defined denominations that differ from one another in Christian doctrine and practice. None of these basic philosophies have varied much since ancient times.

Peter describes some of the characteristics of the false teachers that are vexing the first-century church (and will continue to do so) as they bring in:

**Damnable heresies.** These are quite strong words to describe the content of the teaching of these leaders, including deacons and bishops, who are either ignorant or antagonistic to the gospel and have been given influence in the church. Peter's description exposes the ungodliness of their doctrine. Since their positions are not led of the Holy Spirit, they are of the flesh and carnal. That

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<sup>1</sup> Schreiner, Thomas R. 1,2 Peter, Jude. *The New American Commentary*, Vol. 37. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers. 2003, p. 325.

<sup>2</sup> Hiebert, D. Edmond. A portrayal of false teachers: an exposition of 2 Peter 2:1-3. *Bibliotheca sacra*, 141 no 563 Jul - Sep 1984, p 255-265.

which is of the flesh and carnal is unholy and led of the unholy spirit, satan, making them worthy of spending eternity with him in the “lake of fire.”<sup>3</sup> Any heresy that would serve to alienate an individual from hearing and responding to the gospel in saving faith is one that results in that individual’s eternal separation from God, making it a damnable heresy: one that rewards its proponents and followers with eternal separation from God.

The heresies that were spread in the early church are too numerous to consider in depth here, but we may consider a few.

- Some held that Jesus was not a man, but a spirit who revealed himself as a man. Such a position explains the resurrection by denying Jesus’ humanity.
- Some held that Jesus had already fulfilled His promise of the second coming.
- Some held to an autocratic sovereignty of God that denies personal choice, a heretical position that remains today.
- Some taught that the spiritual and physical were sufficiently separated that one could do anything in the physical without impacting the spiritual, declaring sinful behavior irrelevant to salvation.

When one considers the writings of Paul and Peter, one can come away with the idea that the normative position of the early church fellowships was based primarily in doctrinal error and outright heresies, leading the apostles to aggressively teach and write to the churches and its leaders in an attempt to communicate the truth. Peter already stated in the previous verses that this was the purpose of his writing.

There is certainly a great deal of heresy being taught today by sincere, but uninformed, church leaders. Some who use the media as their platform for propagating their ideas are openly communicating their false teaching to people who themselves are uninformed, spending little if any time in true Bible study. Some charismatic leaders like David Koresh and Jim Jones have made themselves famous for the suicidal danger of their heresies. However, for every Koresh and Jones there are thousands of others who trade the gospel of Christ for a pride-filled stump to stand on, and they mislead others in an orgy of self-aggrandizement or self-fulfillment.

The influence of false teaching is most successfully diminished simply by a comprehensive indoctrination of the faithful in the basic truths of the gospel when they first come to faith. When people know the scriptures from Holy Spirit-lead, teaching, personal, and in-depth study, they are not easily mislead by false

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<sup>3</sup> Revelation 19:20; 20:10,14-15.

teachers. Peter is writing to bring some of that truth to the people so that they can discern false teaching from sound doctrine.

**Denying the LORD that bought them.** Peter clearly identifies that these teachers were “bought,” so at some point they did profess to have faith in God to those in their community. Jesus died on the Cross of Calvary for them, but they, like many who claim the faith but lack its power, never appropriated for themselves the benefit of Jesus’ work. Theirs was a self-proclaimed and self-defined faith that denied the Lordship of Jesus and His identity as the Christ, a problem that is still predominant today. Such a faith is a false-faith and lacks the presence of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of such believers, and is serving to keep them separated from the salvation that the LORD offers. These people may refer to themselves as Christians but have not made Jesus the true LORD of their life. In this way they are denying Christ, and living a life that is not characterized by obedience, claiming identity with the faith but experiencing none of its power. It is these who live lives of hypocrisy as they profess faith but live in the flesh.<sup>4</sup> When people of such shallow faith are elevated to positions of influence in the church the entire fellowship suffers. Such people lack the basic understanding of Lordship and are unable to demonstrate the truth either in their teaching or in their example. Rather than serve under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, it is these who lead others based upon their own self-fulfilling skills, agenda, and interests.

**Swift destruction.** This prophesy of Peter should bring a spirit of sobriety to all who profess to share Christian doctrine with others. We may be reminded of James’ statement that few in the fellowship should be set apart as teachers because theirs is the greater judgment.<sup>5</sup> John writes that the deeds of all people will be exposed for all to see at the final judgment.<sup>6</sup> The writer of Proverbs reveals that the most grievous abomination to the LORD is one who “sews seeds of discord in the fellowship.”<sup>7</sup>

Peter describes the reward for such heretical leaders as “swift destruction.” For some, that destruction begins this side of the grave, as exemplified by Adam House,<sup>8</sup> David Koresh,<sup>9</sup> Jim Jones,<sup>10</sup> the Movement for the Restoration of the

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<sup>4</sup> Some have used this verse to teach a false doctrine of limited atonement, that salvation is not provided for all people, but some are eternally excluded. Chang, Andrew D. Second Peter 2:1 and the extent of the atonement. *Bibliotheca sacra*, 142 no 565 Jan - Mar 1985, p 53.

<sup>5</sup> James 3:1.

<sup>6</sup> c.f. Revelation, Chapter 20.

<sup>7</sup> Proverbs 6:16-19.

<sup>8</sup> 2007. 9 dead, Bangladesh.

<sup>9</sup> 1993. 78 dead, Waco, Texas.

<sup>10</sup> 1978, 917 dead, Guiana.

Ten Commandments of God,<sup>11</sup> and many others who have been exposed for their murderous heresies. Removed from the LORD's hand of protection, there are a myriad of circumstances that can serve to bring calamity to those who abuse the church. Others take their heresies with them to the grave, and in so doing they take with them a host of followers who have been misled. For these who have missed the truth of faith and never embraced the Lordship of God, the destruction is particularly swift. The final judgment is described as taking place at the end of this age and when all people come before God. This is the first step into eternity for carnal man, a step that comes quickly with respect to the infinite abode of heaven and hell.

**2 Peter 2:2. *And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of.***

Those who have been given positions of influence in the Christian fellowship carry a great responsibility as their leadership is always paired with a "follow"-ship. Those who submit to a leader's doctrine are trusting in the truth of that doctrine, and when that truth is a lie that is accepted by the fellowship, without regard to the sincerity of the leader, the entire body lives a lie.

What are the unsaved to think of a fellowship that is divided into so many doctrinal positions by leaders who both teach and demonstrate behaviors that are clearly inconsistent and ungodly? We may have heard testimonies like, "If this is what Christianity is, I want no part of it." Fellowships who are taught doctrinal heresies that preserve their prejudices destroy any opportunity to evangelize the target of their prejudice, and at the same time teach the target of prejudice that the Christian church is a collection of hypocritical bigots. Ungodly behavior by those professing the faith generates no limit of criticism as the body that should be demonstrating unconditional agape love is exposed, and their "evil" is spoken of.

**2 Peter 2:3. *And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you: whose judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their damnation slumbereth not.***

False teachers often apply their gifts of leadership and administration in order that they would find personal gain, whether material or emotional. That gain can be broad and far-reaching, limited only by that which people use in their mission to satisfy their base desires. We have seen those who use their position of spiritual notoriety to amass great personal wealth. Some over-the-top examples of today's most unabashed American wealth-seeking evangelists include

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<sup>11</sup> 2008. 718 dead. Uganda.

Kenneth Copeland,<sup>12</sup> Benny Hinn, Joel Osteen, Creflo Dollar, Eddie Long, and many more. Others may not be seeking material wealth, but seek to gather for themselves power over their fellowship as their notoriety and celebrity gives them a sense of great personal pride. This need for personal significance is found in congregations of every size, from the largest, to most commonly, the smallest. Many small churches remain small and unchanged by their fortress doctrine that does not welcome any others into their chapel than the few families and friends who define it.

Regardless of the fleshly desires that are satiated by their heresies, Peter describes them as using their skills to communicate powerless words that simply use those in their group of followers as “merchandise” to fulfill their own desires. The false teachers are using their followers as tools of their trade for no more than a form of personal profit.

This argument should also catch the attention of church leaders today. Peter and Paul both attest that there are only two types of Christian leaders and teachers – those who serve God, and those who serve themselves. If you have been given influence in the Christian fellowship, do you use that influence to meet your needs and propagate your desires and agenda, or do you sacrifice your needs and desires to meet the needs of the body? It is evident that Peter is referring to those who use their position to satisfy their own needs.

Again, Peter reminds us that the reward for such service is very short-termed, because the judgment of God is not far off: it is only a heartbeat away. When the heretic takes the rewards of his efforts to the grave, they are all left behind, as the judgment of God will always give the just and proper reward. Peter describes this reward as a damnation that is neither delayed or sleeping.

Sometimes those who have established positions of influence in the church, and present themselves as unchallengeable within the limits of their fellowship, act as if they are invincible. They act as if there is no challenger to their throne of power and influence, and among the people who make up the core of the fellowship that may be true. However, Peter reminds us of just how powerful we are against the truth of God’s word:

**2 Peter 2:4-8. *For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment; <sup>5</sup>And spared not the old world, but saved Noah the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the***

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<sup>12</sup> As the fund-raising king, Kenneth Copeland has amassed a fortune of \$720 million, more than eight times the \$40M amassed by the two in second place, Joel Osteen and Benny Hinn.

***flood upon the world of the ungodly; <sup>6</sup>And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an ensample unto those that after should live ungodly; <sup>7</sup>And delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: <sup>8</sup>(For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds;)***

Using several examples, Peter notes that from the angels down through the patriarchs, there are none who escape the judgment of God. The angels who were cast down are those whom we now refer to as Satan's demons as they who were created as God's messengers turned against Him. Peter also reminds us that God once executed a quite graphic judgment upon the wickedness of the world when He destroyed all but one family, the family of Noah, the eighth generation of "proclaimers of righteousness" after Enoch.<sup>13</sup> "Noah thus fractions, together with "righteous Lot", as the positive counterpart to the sinful angels, the ungodly ancient world, and the notorious cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, all of which suffered God's judgment."<sup>14</sup>

The reference to Lot may be curious, and quite consistent with the context of Peter's exposition of false teachers. Peter refers to Lot, the nephew of Abraham, as "just." This could come as a surprising description to those who have studied the life of Lot. Most of what we know of him comes from his experience in Sodom when, attracted by its sensuality, he "pitched his tent" towards the city, and then moved into it. He led his family into an immersion in Sodom's sinfulness, and took them so deep into it that its sin impacted his family in a very significant way. However, Lot's sins were illustrated as coming from his willingness to allow himself to be "indoctrinated" into the sinfulness of Sodom. This illustrates the power of sinfulness to "vex" the faithful and pull them in as it did Lot.

The LORD delivered Lot from the city before He destroyed it. Note that Peter places the blame, not on Lot, but on the city. Even the faithful can be misled by those who offer to satiate their base desires, and Peter makes it clear that the LORD is not mocked by the false teachers who mislead them. The LORD can both deliver the faithful from the influence of the false teacher, and promises to provide the appropriate judgment for the false teacher.

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<sup>13</sup> Jensen, Matthew D. Noah, the eighth proclaimer of righteousness: understanding 2 Peter 2.5 in light of Genesis 4.26. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 37 no 4 Jun 2015, p 458.

<sup>14</sup> Hafemann, Scott J. 'Noah, the preacher of (God's) righteousness': the argument from scripture in 2 Peter 2:5 and 9. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 76 no 2 Apr 2014, p 306.

Because the false teachers lived wickedly and disseminated their wickedness to others, they will certainly be judged by God.<sup>15</sup> These are words of encouragement to the faithful who are constantly abused or bullied by these leaders who seem too powerful or distant to approach. It also clearly vindicates their sincere desire to live a life of godly integrity when they are so deeply immersed in a wicked world that even the false teachers support.

**2 Peter 2:9. *The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished:***

We see God's preservation of the faithful in the examples of Noah and Lot who were both spared of the consequences of God's wrath towards the wicked world in which they were immersed. God clearly knows and intends upon defending the faithful while executing an appropriate judgment upon the wicked. Peter points out some of the characteristics of the judged wicked, many of whom had been given significant influence in the church,<sup>16</sup> that serve to separate them from the characteristics of the faithful whom he is serving to encourage:

**2 Peter 2:10. *But chiefly them that walk after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness, and despise government. Presumptuous are they, selfwilled, they are not afraid to speak evil of dignities.***

**Walk after the flesh.** Some false teachers are characterized by a life that rejects the Lordship of Christ in favor of following their own, worldly, agenda. With no interest in following the promptings of the Holy Spirit, they prefer to satiate their own base desires. They lust after the things of this world, its power, its personal pride, and its pleasures. Their demeanor is not characterized by meekness and humility, but rather by pride and a strong personal agenda. The word that is rendered "uncleanness" is often used to describe sexual sin, and in the case of Peter's argument may have likely referred to the practice of infidelity, polygamy, and homosexuality among some of those teachers, a practice that was common in the community of those Greeks who held to a separation of spiritual and physical responsibility.<sup>17</sup>

**Despise Government.** The false teachers demonstrate an unwillingness to submit to authority. The word that is rendered *government* or *authority* is the Greek *kyriotes*, not referring as much to secular government authority as it is to

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<sup>15</sup> Schreiner, Thomas R. 1,2 Peter, Jude. *The New American Commentary*, Vol. 37. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers. 2003, p. 334.

<sup>16</sup> Desjardins, Michel R. The portrayal of the dissidents in 2 Peter and Jude: does it tell us more about the 'godly' than the 'ungodly'?. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 30 Jun 1987, p 90..

<sup>17</sup> Green, *1 Peter and Jude*, 114; Moo, *2 Peter, Jude*, 107.



the call to leadership given to those apostles, pastors, and teachers who maintain their focus on the sovereignty and Lordship of Christ, and to whom the false teachers are to be submissive.<sup>18</sup> The false teachers despise those who have spiritual authority over them, thinking themselves superior to them. They reject the authority of the Apostles and deny their teaching.

**Presumptuous.** Translated as “bold (*tolmetai*) and arrogant (*authadeis*)” in the NIV, many of the false teachers are characterized by a spirit of arrogance. They are gifted with extraordinary confidence but lack in humility and wisdom. Because of this boldness they have no reverence or fear of any level of church authority, *doxas*, even rejecting the messengers who are sent by God with God’s Word.

**2 Peter 2:11. *Whereas angels, which are greater in power and might, bring not railing accusation against them before the Lord.***

Though Peter (and Paul) go to great lengths to teach the church how to recognize false teachers, it is evident that they do not actually attack them personally. They do not single out individuals for judgment. We may recall the singling out of the Nicolaitans,<sup>19</sup> and a few others, but these accusations were made by Jesus who is given all authority to judge.

The false teachers easily pass judgment upon those whom the LORD has placed in spiritual authority over them. However, those who do exhibit godly behavior, even those who are messengers of God, do not presume to pass such judgment. Though the false teachers would unapologetically reject the spiritual maturity and authority of God’s messengers, that same maturity promotes in those angels a spirit of humility that would not presume to pass judgment, reserving that task for the One Judge, Jesus Christ. While the false teachers take a stand against the existing church leadership, including Peter, Paul and the other apostles, the leadership does not lower themselves into sin in order to fight back, rather they put their trust in the LORD to exact judgment.

This methodology of teaching and illumination allows the LORD to work in the heart of the false teacher without creating internal strife in the fellowship. Peter and Paul are free to love the false teacher while they teach solid doctrine, expose false doctrine, and describe false teachers in enough detail that those teachers have the ability to hear, to respond to the message, and to repent. The resulting repentance has the potential to produce a wonderful redemption, restoring the false teachers to the truth and enables the Holy Spirit to utilize their gifts for the

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<sup>18</sup> Luther, Martin, *Commentary on Peter & Jude*, 265-66; Calvin, *Catholic Epistles*, 401;

<sup>19</sup> Revelation 2:6,15.



purpose that God intends. In this scenario everyone gains, and only satan and his dominion loses.

**2 Peter 2:12. *But these, as natural brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed, speak evil of the things that they understand not; and shall utterly perish in their own corruption;***

The false teachers pride themselves on their insight and wisdom, thinking that their lack of fear and trembling is a manifestation of their superiority.<sup>20</sup> This is quite a contrast to Peter's description as he refers to them as irrational, acting upon natural instinct rather than the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Like animals, the false teachers engage personal and carnal desires and feelings instead of spiritual reasoning.<sup>21</sup> They think of themselves as wise and learned, but they expose their folly when they speak against things that they themselves do not understand.

Peter then describes the ultimate consequence of the behavior of these false teachers as a product of their own corruption. The metaphor that Peter uses likens their fate to that of a dangerous animal that is captured and destroyed by the hunter, not because of the desire of the hunter to capture or kill, but because of the dedication of the hunter to the protection of those he is committed to protect.

**2 Peter 2:13. *And shall receive the reward of unrighteousness, as they that count it pleasure to riot in the day time. Spots they are and blemishes, sporting themselves with their own deceivings while they feast with you;***

As Peter has just noted that the false teachers will be judged, he now states some reasons why. The final judgment will be sure, and will be based upon God's fair dispensation of reward. They may be thinking that the reward that they are receiving is great. The source for this statement, Jude 11, indicates that their expected reward is monetary.<sup>22</sup> The indictment is brought upon the false teacher because his own actions and he bears the full responsibility for his refusal to repent. When we think of a "reward" we tend to understand it to be something good that is received as a form of payment for something we have

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<sup>20</sup> Schreiner, Thomas R. 1,2 Peter, Jude. *The New American Commentary, Vol. 37.* Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers. 2003, p. 349.

<sup>21</sup> In his critique of the false teachers in 2:1-22, the author of 2 Peter is dependent on Jude 4-16. He has taken the comparison of the false teachers to irrational animals from Jude 10. He has also taken the connection of the false teachers to Balaam from Jude 11. Callan, Terrance. Comparison of humans to animals in 2 Peter 2,10b-22. *Biblica*, 90 no 1 2009, p 101-113.

<sup>22</sup> Skehan, Patrick William. Note on 2 Peter 2:13. *Biblica*, 41 no 1 1960, p 71.

done. However, Jewish tradition held no such limitation on the use of the term, as a reward is given that is consistent with the act that initiated it. Ancient Jews perceived a reward of good things for righteous behavior, and a reward of bad things for unrighteous behavior. In many ways it was a misunderstanding, based upon this tradition, that caused the Jews to attribute sickness and other crises of life as a sin judgment. Some of the reasons Peter gives for this sure judgment:

**Riot in the daytime.** The expression of sin in the daytime is an allusion to the boldness of that sin.<sup>23</sup> Ancient tradition held that sin is typically practiced in darkness, and these are so bold that they do not wait until dark, but practice their sin in the full light of day, all day long.

**Spots and blemishes.** These false teachers are part of the church body, that which is to be brought to the LORD as a pure and unblemished bride.<sup>24</sup> The words that Peter uses is a reference to the demand that the LORD gave to the Israelites to present their sacrifice without spot or blemish.<sup>25</sup> The idea is that, though they consider themselves righteous and pure, the LORD considers them wholly unacceptable. Their sin stains and defiles the church. At the close of this letter Peter returns to this metaphor when he calls upon the church to be the direct opposite of this as they stand spotless and blameless before the LORD.

Of course, all people sin and come short of the mark of God's perfect glory,<sup>26</sup> so we recognize that it is a spotted and blemished people who come before the LORD. However, God has forgiven the sins of those who have placed their faith and trust in Him as their LORD when their lives have been characterized by repentance. The daytime sin of the false teachers implies no such repentance. Consequently, even as Peter writes, the false teachers can find forgiveness and redemption through the simple avenue of repentance that comes from a renewed and sincere faith in God.

**Feast with You.** As is still true today, ancient Jews placed a lot of emphasis on the experience of fellowship that surrounds the act of eating together. The traditions surrounding eating were deeply integrated in their theological traditions as they incorporated much prayer and prophetic ritual in the meal. The application of the word translated "deceivings" here does not refer to an open act of deception by the religious leaders as they share in the prayers and rituals, but refers to their being deceived. These teachers are in complete denial of their unrepentance, carrying their stains and blemishes into the feast, reveling in their pleasures, "sporting themselves," in their self-appointed righteousness.

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<sup>23</sup> Romans 13:12-13; Ecclesiastes 10:16.

<sup>24</sup> Revelation 18:23, 21:2, 21:9, 22:17.

<sup>25</sup> Leviticus 1:3,10; 3:1,6; 4:3,23,28. And many others.

<sup>26</sup> Romans 3:23.

**1 Peter 2:14. *Having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin; beguiling unstable souls: an heart they have exercised with covetous practices; cursed children:***

**Eyes full of adultery.** It may be curious that Peter does not note that these false teachers are engaged in the practice of adultery, though some certainly may be. If the false teachers were to practice adultery, their overt sin would be soon discovered, they would lose their credibility among the people, and they would lose the power over others that they so strongly desire. Instead, their adultery is in their eyes. Their lust and desire may be held back from their actions, but that lust is still seated in their heart. The Greek phrase is literally, “eyes full of an adulteress,” that may be an allusion to a pun in Greek literature that a man with no shame does not have maidens in his eyes but harlots.<sup>27</sup> These look upon women as candidates for adultery, though they are limited to their lust since no opportunity for such behavior actually exists.

**Cannot cease from sin.** This phrase is still attached to the imagery of the use of “eyes,” presenting the idea that the individual is constantly observing the surroundings for opportunities to satiate their own desires. If the sin were sexual lust, the individual is continuing to imagine others as potential candidates for adultery. If the sin is pride, the individual is continuing to imagine him/herself as superior to others. The false teacher is enslaved to any number of sins that, though may be hidden from others, continually vex and may even frustrate the individual.

**Beguiling unstable souls.** The term for “beguiling” or “seducing” is a hunting term that is used to describe the process of setting a bait that is deliberately set in place to ensnare an unsuspecting prey. These false teachers have little or no influence over those who are mature and stable in their faith. However, they have the gifts and social skills to take advantage of those who are not as well-grounded in the faith. They seek to satiate their own needs by drawing spiritual babes into their little circle of power in order to obtain what they want from others.

**Covetous practices.** Peter shifts from the sensual sins to the sins of desire for power. The word translated “exercised,” *gegymnasmenen*, from which we derive the word, “gymnasium,” implies that that the expression of self-centered sin is not spontaneous, but something that has been continually practiced and developed, strengthened as one strengthens and trains muscles to perform a physical task.

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<sup>27</sup> Plutarch, Mor. 528E. Cited in Schreiner, Thomas R. 1,2 Peter, Jude. *The New American Commentary*, Vol. 37. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers. 2003, p. 352.

This exercise has brought them to the point of a demonstrated skill and proficiency in the practice of drawing others into their influence.

**Cursed children.** Peter returns to the tragedy that is the consequence of the behavior of the false teachers. It is evident that these individuals started their faith journey with some knowledge of the gospel. It is also evident that they are quite gifted in many ways since they are able to use those gifts to elevate themselves among the fellowship to the point of political and spiritual influence. It appears that, if those skills were brought under the power of the Holy Spirit, these individuals could be like Paul who changed from an antagonist of the Spirit to a tremendous leader in God's kingdom work simply through the act of repentance. Prior to Paul's conversion he was cursed. Peter is probably remembering his own self-centeredness and his own pride that drove his own gifts prior to his salvation experience. Remembering the curse that he himself was subject to, he reminds the false teachers and those who follow them that those teachers are still subject to that same judgment for their choices as they have taken the gifts that God gave them to promote kingdom work and are using them to satiate their own personal desires and agenda.

**2 Peter 2:15-16. *Which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; <sup>16</sup>But was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man's voice forbad the madness of the prophet.***

Peter recalls from the history of Israel, how they went astray. This implies (consistent with his earlier statements) that the false teachers started out on the right path, or the right "way," but turned away from some point and followed their own path, one that drew them further and further from God's purpose until they get to the point that they have not only left the gospel purpose, but are now antagonists to it.

Peter draws an example from the life of the prophet Balaam,<sup>28</sup> who was quite satisfied with the acclaim that he received with his status as a prophet, but who wandered so far from God's purpose that his own donkey had a better idea of God's purpose than he did. Balaam had wandered so far from his calling that he found himself on a mission to curse the people of Israel, doing so for personal and financial gain. Balaam was turned back by God's word, spoken through the voice of his donkey. Likewise, the false teachers have wandered away from their calling and are using their skills to seek their own rewards and, like Baalam, are in need of a word from God to turn them around. In some ways, this passage,

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<sup>28</sup> Numbers 22-24.

written by Peter serves as such a word, as do several similar passages by Paul and a parallel passage written by Jude.<sup>29</sup>

**2 Peter 2:17. *These are wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest; to whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever.***

Peter continues to describe some of the characteristics of false teachers and their impact on those whom they influence. Again, this description is both intended to expose them to the body of believers, and also to allow the false teachers to recognize some of these characteristics in themselves so that they can repent, turn back to God, and fulfill the marvelous purpose that God had originally intended for them.

**Wells without water.** Peter turns to a pair of metaphors that are quite relevant to the arid region of the ancient near-eastern community to whom he writes. The quality of life in the ancient near-east is closely tied to the availability of water. Such life-sustaining water comes from several sources, including wells and rain clouds. Peter likens the character of the false teachers to dry wells. One approaches what looks like a well, purports to be a well, but when an attempt to draw water from the well is made, one finds only dust. Only thirst and death results from the effort. The false teachers purport to live and teach the truth, but upon close inspection the truth simply is not found. One comes away from the examination with an understanding of who they are, but do not find the fountain of God's love and truth in their words.

**Clouds that are carried by the wind.** One might use this passage to refer to the false teachers as "wind bags," and such an assessment may not be far from the truth. When rain clouds approach the arid land, the people are excited and ready for the receipt of life-giving showers that seem to be forming before them. However, the clouds that Peter describes are simply carried by the wind and pass without a drop of rain.<sup>30</sup> When one listens to the words of these false teachers, and when one examines their life, they find their life and their words devoid of life-giving truth. One hears no shortage of opinions and judgments that are the product of the individual's pride and arrogance. These statements can be lofty and inspiring, but they are not the product of God's Word as revealed and illuminated by the love of God and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, once the opinions and judgments have passed, they are gone and like the dry clouds, leave nothing of true value behind them.

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<sup>29</sup> Jude 4, i.e.

<sup>30</sup> c.f. Jude 12; Jeremiah 2:13.

**Midst of darkness.** Peter has already noted that the false teachers who are misleading and misdirecting the early church had the opportunity to know the truth, but chose to hold tightly to their own desires, enjoying the notoriety and respect that their position in the body brings to them, yet by leaving the truth behind, they have chosen to immerse themselves in the darkness of their own self-will. They have chosen to live in the frustration of this darkness, and without repentance, it is within this darkness that they will remain. Peter reminds us that the darkest judgment is reserved for those who propagate error.

**2 Peter 2:18. *For when they speak great swelling words of vanity, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness, those that were clean escaped from them who live in error.***

One of the primary needs of these false teachers is that of a worldly significance, one that influences others. They use “great swelling words of vanity” to achieve this end, thinking somehow that the influence that they gain is of great profit. They are successful in drawing to themselves others who share in their worldly wantonness. They prey on the ignorant to share in their own ignorance. Recall that much of the false teaching of the first-century promoted sensual and ungodly behavior, so those who reveled in that behavior would flock to these teachers.

Perhaps we are witnessing a form of Christian denominationalism where different fellowships accrete into identifiable groups with distinctive beliefs and behaviors, dividing the body of Christ, and creating pockets of heresy. The members of these groups reinforce each other’s error, as they wander farther and farther from the truth until that error is evident to some of those who have been so deceived. In this way, the “clean,” those who are recently new to the faith, find themselves to be prey to these predators, pressured into renouncing their belief in the gospel. Those whose faith was mature would not be so tempted, and escaped the snare.

**2 Peter 2:19. *While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage.***

When one is listening to the teachings of these false teachers, they may hear lofty words of freedom, freedom from the many moral restraints that would seem to hold them from obtaining what they truly desire. Many in this world still perceive the Christian faith as a faith of bondage with a long list of “thou shalt nots,” that serve only to restrict one’s freedom. Perhaps the faithful have added to this misconception by practicing forms of legalism that do, indeed, place bondage on one another. The false teachers can and do capitalize on this misconception and offer liberty as a freedom of personal expression that is



submitted to no authority (except, perhaps, their own). They are not teaching their adherents to submit to God, or to submit to the counsel of the Holy Spirit, nor are they teaching their adherence to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The very freedom that they espouse serves only to hold them in the bondage of unrepented sin that carries the penalty of eternal death.

Consequently, by teaching this form of freedom, the false teachers are “servants of corruption,” leading the people to death instead of life. Peter literally states, “a man is a slave to that which masters him.” Their master is not Jesus Christ, but rather the fruits of their own sinful desires. Rather than preaching of a LORD and Savior who has come to deliver them from destruction, they teach a humanistic philosophy that rejects the Lordship of Christ and serves only to keep their adherents in their own lost state.

“The promised water and clarity to those who were thirsty and confused, but instead they left them parched and confused. Hence, their judgment is just. ... They spoke with a kind of assertive confidence that made the weak think they must have known what they were talking about. They appealed to sinful human desires, arguing that it made no difference at all if we indulge our sexual appetites to the full. They maintained that their teaching was the pathway to freedom, arguing that the gospel originally received is nothing other than bondage.”<sup>31</sup>

**2 Peter 2:20-22. *For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. <sup>21</sup>For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. <sup>22</sup>But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.***

Peter ends his exposition on the character of the first-century false teachers and the impact on their adherents with a tragic indictment. Like James, who teaches of a greater judgment for those who take on for themselves the responsibility of leadership in the Christian fellowship,<sup>32</sup> Peter describes the greater judgment that comes upon those who have so turned from the purity of the truth and have taken others with them. Peter refers to these as “overcome” by the pollutions of

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<sup>31</sup> Schreiner, Thomas R. 1,2 Peter, Jude. *The New American Commentary*, Vol. 37. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers. 2003, p. 355.

<sup>32</sup> James 3:1.



this world, even though they had at some point in their experience made a profession of faith.

His implication is that their profession was sincere, but lacked the commitment to Lordship that is the fruit of true repentance. Without that commitment, they have nowhere to turn but back to the pollution that they were given the power to overcome. This is particularly true of those who are teaching the antinomian and humanistic philosophies that separate spiritual and physical responsibility. These heresies teach that all manner of physical gratification is acceptable since salvation is a spiritual gift, and is not related to one's actions.<sup>33</sup> Adherents to antinomianism fall back into the physical sins, but do so in a state that is worse than those who have never heard the truth. When one compares them to those who have never heard the gospel, they are found to be in apostasy and direct rebellion against God. Peter states that it would have been better if they had never heard the gospel in the first place. "Peter was warning those most susceptible to the bait being offered by false teachers. He was not attempting to depict the awful consequences of apostasy. Nor was he dealing with the problem of whether or not one can lose his salvation in Christ. Instead he was warning those recently saved that the subtle enticements of false teachers and the wooings of their old natures not lead them into the snare of sin."<sup>34</sup>

False teachers were having a devastating impact upon the early church. Consequently, each of the New Testament writers contribute a large amount of text to this subject as they take a firm stand against such destructive behaviors. They serve to describe the character and impact of those who pervert the gospel message and lead others away from the saving grace of the LORD. Through their efforts, the false teaching of the apostate leaders can be recognized by those whom they seek to mislead. At the same time, the false teachers may be able to see the error of their choices and repent.

The era of false teaching did not end in the first century. The propagation of heresy has continued through the centuries and is certainly still common today. Rather than be unified under the Lordship of Christ, the church has been divided into "denominations," that each teaches some distinctive form of the gospel, and many of these reject the teachings of other Christians. There is no shortage of Christian cults who teach a brand of religion that denies the basic tenets of the faith. Most cults can be readily recognized by their rejection of Jesus as Yahweh, Jehovah. Still others teach worldly philosophies that promise all manner of freedom and reward to those who summarily reject the tenets of the gospel, replacing them with systems of thought, rites, and rituals that are claimed

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<sup>33</sup> Romans 6:1-2.

<sup>34</sup> Dunham, Duane A. An exegetical study of 2 Peter 2:18-22. *Bibliotheca sacra*, 140 no 557 Jan - Mar 1983, p 51.

to bring one to righteousness. Some have removed the gospel message of salvation and commitment to the LORD and replaced it with a set of programs focused on social justice. By “including” all people in the fellowship, they have rejected holiness for worldliness, and exchanged unrighteousness for purity.

The church has always been under attack by philosophies that are promoted by the evil one. We may be reminded that the enemy is satan who seeks to poison the minds of all potential believers so that they would join him in his rebellion against God. His attacks can be averted by a heart that sincerely loves the LORD, who submits to His Lordship, and to His Word so that one can be set free, indeed.